

WEST VALLEY ART MUSEUM



In the beginning . . .

The story began nearly thirty-five years ago, when some ambitious residents of the world's first active retirement community, Sun City, envisioned a local Museum to exhibit fine art from all parts of the world. In October 1976, a group led by Rex Staley (who was then president of Sun City Bank) leased a wing of the Merrill Lynch building, on the northeast corner of Bell Road and 98th Avenue, to become our first temporary home.

After leaving the Merrill Lynch building, we became a "Museum without walls" for a short period, sponsoring small art exhibits in churches and banks.

The late 1970s were active fundraising years, in anticipation of acquiring our own building.

Coincidentally, the Phoenix Art Museum was then considering some satellite facilities. The two groups worked together for some time, but the relationship amicably ended and the Sun Cities Art Museum was born. A gala banquet was held in December 1980 to celebrate the new Museum's incorporation as a nonprofit group not associated with any other institution.

The First Building . . .

The Del Webb Corporation later donated a small parcel of land at 111th Avenue and Thunderbird Road in Sun City. Although marketing brochures and construction plans were developed, with a groundbreaking in 1983, it became apparent that there was little room for future expansion of the Museum at that location. About this same time, the Museum's trustees learned of Arizona State University's intention to create a campus, to be called ASU West, in the Agua Fria River Valley. The trustees clearly saw the advantages of locating the Museum near the proposed ASU site. The Del Webb Corporation exchanged the Thunderbird parcel for the property between 115th and future 114th Avenue, deeded it free and clear to the Museum, and fundraising was accelerated.

By 1984, adequate funds were raised to begin construction of the first phase of our Museum. ASU West later decided not to locate in the then undeveloped northwest valley. The Museum founders and a core group of more than 400 "Charter Members," each donating a minimum of \$100, finally saw their dream become a reality. When the first parts of the Museum opened in the spring of 1985, they were all fully paid for. The original building contained the Hoover Foyer/Gallery area, the Heffernon Room, the Shields-Marsh Museum Store, and related office/work rooms.

Adding On . . .

About eighteen months later, the Jensen Wing was added, providing a large high-ceilinged gallery, along with a second-level space for collections and office space. Off the rear of the foyer a small conservatory was added, fondly remembered for its weekly teas and small gatherings. The Lasher Vestibule added a dramatic entrance to the Museum and provided a welcome transition from the Arizona heat to the air-conditioned interior.

Further Expansion . . .

The Museum's success led to renewed fundraising in the mid-1990s. By 1996, the Museum was completed, triple in size from its beginnings! Additions included the Hoover Great Gallery, the Hoover Cultural Center, Schuld Library, the Stone Tea Room, Helene's (Gumina) Kitchen and the Sculpture Garden. A secure collections area, a work area, and a loading dock were also added.

The vision continued to grow. In 1997, the name was changed to include West Valley Art Museum, reflecting our growing influence and audience. At this time, we began a partnership with Classic Catering, and the Classic Cafe was created in the Stone Tea Room, providing dining and extended food services for Museum events, fundraisers, and outside rentals.

Growing community enthusiasm and acceptance of our programs led to purchasing, in 1999, the 2.7 acres of adjacent land on the east side of the building, allowing for an entrance from 114th Avenue which was renamed "Avenue of the Arts" in recognition of the Museum. A small parcel of vacant land on the west side of the Museum was also purchased at this time.

In 2003 a new ceramic tile floor was laid in the Hoover Cultural Center, the result of a gift of the George Palovich family. In 2005 one row of cases was removed from the end of the Hoover Cultural Center to create a performance stage for concerts and other performing venues, a gift of Constance McMillin, Jan Trisler and George Palovich.

From 2003 to 2007 significant exhibitions continued to be the norm for the Museum. Changes in leadership brought new challenges and the sudden economic downturn and its effects on many non-profits brought the Museum's financial position to a critical juncture. While modest bank debt had been stabilized, there was only modest corresponding increase in revenue. Unfortunately an additional loan to do some remodeling and upgrade of aging facilities was obtained. WVAM leadership allowed all monies to be moved to a new bank as well as allowing the building and land to be used as collateral. As that bank was failing in Arizona it caused a near foreclosure situation at the Museum. A team of buyers stepped in at the last minute but the Museum had to vacate the building over a phased six month plan.

One concerned long-time Museum patron reached out...and contact was made with leaders of the City of Peoria. In turn, Peoria was renovating their City Hall first floor to include an Art Gallery in anticipation of Arizona's centennial to occur in 2012. Thus in April 2010, the City of Peoria agreed to provide highly secure storage space for the Museum's collection and with opportunities to show items from the collection in various city sites. During the next year, an agreement was worked out for WVAM to operate the new Peoria City Hall Art Gallery, including the annual juried show, showcase the collections and bring in new exhibits. By spring 2011 the first WVAM show "Arizona Artists" was on view in the Peoria Gallery space.

The Future . . .

The Museum continues to operate with a Board of Trustees and a small group of dedicated volunteers, among them a former curator, who, in 2015, was rehired as Interim Curator. The Museum hopes to build a new membership and volunteer base with a loyal core group and expanded fundraising as well as new programming that will continue to keep West Valley Art Museum a premier cultural venue evolving forward ever mindful of its unique history and fine art collection.